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DE RUEHLC #0029 0181200
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FM AMEMBASSY LIBREVILLE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9520
INFO RUEHUJA/AMEMBASSY ABUJA 0373
RUEHKI/AMEMBASSY KINSHASA 1349
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0327
RUEHLU/AMEMBASSY LUANDA 0938
RUEHNJ/AMEMBASSY NDJAMENA 0412
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0849
RUEHSA/AMEMBASSY PRETORIA 1011
RUEHYD/AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE 0750
RHMFSS/COMUSNAVEUR NAPLES IT
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C O N F I D E N T I A L LIBREVILLE 000029

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KINSHASA ALSO FOR BRAZZAVILLE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/17/2017

TAGS: MCAP SF GB EK

SUBJECT: GABON BUYS USED MIRAGES FROM SOUTH AFRICA

Classified By: Ambassador Barrie Walkley for reasons 1.4 b and d

¶1. (U) Gabon has purchased at least 3 Dassault Mirage F1-AZ fighters from South Africa's Aerosud and Paramount group, which apparently has acquired all of the remaining SAAF F1 airframes. The planes are approximately 30 years old but were upgraded in the 90s and are reported to be in excellent condition. Two of the planes made their initial appearance in Libreville several months ago during Gabon's August 17 National Day parade and caused a sensation when they buzzed the parade route along the coast upside down at low altitude. The planes currently are being flown by South African pilots.

¶2. (C) It remains unclear precisely how much Gabon paid for the planes -- or how many are included. Minister of Defense Ali Bongo told the Ambassador that Gabon initially was interested in six planes, with accompanying spare parts and training packages -- but that the final cost may determine how many are purchased. Three have been delivered initially (two flown to Gabon in time for the August parade, the third arriving by ship). The planes are based in Franceville (in Gabon's interior). When asked by the Ambassador why Gabon needs fighters, Ali Bongo pointed to regional security needs (explaining, for example, that the French had to be called in to help in the CAR as FOMUC countries had no airstrike capability) and Gabon's own security needs (claiming, for example, that Equatorial Guinea -- a country with which Gabon has a border dispute -- has purchased attack helicopters). Ali Bongo said that he initially approached France regarding possible fighter purchases but was advised by the French that Gabon could get a better deal from South Africa for the kinds of planes being sought.

WALKLEY